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Abstract

Two laboratory experiments are reported which describe the effects of the presence of a neutral in a communication network during the resolution of differences of opinion between two persons. The presence of a neutral was found to be associated with increased resistance to persuasion, increased number of messages between parties, and increased perception of difficulty in resolving the conflict. It was proposed that the neutral sustains conflict by prematurely rendering public the positions of the parties involved. Member tenure and power were found to be positively associated, suggesting that open groups in contrast to closed groups more readily incur conflict.

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There is an implicit assumption related to conflict resolution that the presence of a neutral member facilitates agreement between two opposing parties. Research on the effects of neutrality, appears to be almost non-existent. Perhaps, the paucity of research supports the belief that neutrality is an imaginary position, a convenient term for an indefinite region somewhere between support and opposition of one of the two persons in conflict. Third party effects are usually discussed (McGrath, 1963; Sawyer & Guetzkow, 1965) within a context of negotiation in which the third party takes an active role. The role of the third party is often seen under such negotiation conditions as a special condition of neutrality.

It is proposed here that the disputants' perception of the third person is crucial, and that neutrality is associated with potential force rather than inertia. The disputants perceive the neutral as being uncommitted but in the process of gathering information preparatory to making a decision. Thus, the neutral in a three-person communication situation

represents a potential coalition force, or even a mild implicit coalition.

From yet another viewpoint, the third person in a conflict situation (or in a communication net in general) renders the dispute public, (Boulding, 1962) that is, he may be perceived by the disputants as representing public opinion. In the presence of a neutral member, the disputants risk commitment to a public position which is less amenable to compromise. Seen thus, the presence of a neutral may emphasize competition between the disputants. The opposing parties may perceive themselves as contesting for the support of the neutral and may view the outcome as determining their relative status in the eyes of the public. Under these conditions, the presence of a neutral is presumed to be associated with increased interpersonal anxiety and to prolong the decision-making process or to render more remote the possibility of agreement between the two participants. Thus, it is proposed that the presence of a neutral restricts the communication process and protracts the policy making process, particularly in the initial stages of negotiation between two opposing parties.

Study I^2

Persuasion in the Presence of a Neutral

The first experiment was designed to study persuasion in the presence of a neutral member and under varying conditions of tenure of the persuader. In this experiment a difference of opinion was systematically generated between persons a and b through the expedient of assigning the a position to a confederate who assumed an opinion which differed from b by a preestablished degree.

In accordance with the introductory theoretical statements concerning neutrality, it is proposed that the presence of a third neutral party in a situation where a is attempting to persuade b, is associated with an increase in b's resistance to a. Here, it is proposed that the neutrality of the third person may be interpreted by b as indicating that the third person is unconvinced of the advantage of the position taken by a. More generally, it is proposed that the neutral may be perceived by each disputant as a potential supporter of his own position.

It is also proposed that the power of an egressor diminishes in direct relation to his remaining membership time; that is, power in a group and tenure are directly related. It is assumed that the group's ability to resist forces emanating from the egressor may be maximized through certain strategies. For example, the group may delay reaching a decision or acting upon a decision until after the egressor's departure (e.g., a "lame-duck" session of Congress). In studying the effect of a persuasive group on a single individual, Gerard and Rotter (1961) found that when it was known that the next group session would probably not contain the same group members, the temporary group members showed greater resistance to influence.

The tenure-power hypotheses and the Gerard-Rotter findings may be interpreted from an open-closed group framework (Ziller, 1965). An open group anticipates or experiences membership changes, whereas membership in a closed group remains fixed. In these terms, the evolving hypotheses is that open groups more readily incur conflict than do closed groups. Under closed group conditions, negative concomittants of conflict such as interpersonal anxiety and hostility are not dissipated through membership changes.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 48 new recruits from the U. S. Naval Training School in Bainbridge, Maryland. The subjects were assigned to the experiment by their training group leaders as part of the military training program.

Procedure

Two variables were employed in a 2 x 3 factorial design: dyadic -neutral and tenure. The dyadic group condition involved only a persuader and a subject, whereas the triadic group condition involved the persuader, a subject, and an additional third member (the neutral). The three tenure conditions included the "remain" condition in which all members were to remain together throughout all the scheduled sessions; a "may-leave" condition (included on an explanatory basis) in which the persuader had the alternative of leaving or staying after the first session; a "leave" condition in which the persuader would definitely be leaving the group following the first session.

In the experiment, the subject met with one or two other subjects (actually confederates) who were already seated when the naive subject arrived. Before entering the test room, the subject was informed that it would be necessary for him to return for a few more scheduled sessions with the same group. In all cases, subjects agreed to return, though in reality only one session was required. The group members were not introduced to one another but were seated together at a partitioned table, which was designed to permit note passing among the members in an open communication network.

An initial warm-up task was designed to familiarize the subjects with

the communication apparatus. The subjects were asked to arrive at a single group decision concerning the number of poker chips in a jar. No data were recorded for this initial interaction.

In the second and crucial task, the group was shown a 20 x 25 inch white card containing approximately 500 three-quarter inch black dots scattered randomly over the card. Within a 15 minute limit, the group was required to submit a single decision concerning the correct number of dots on the card.

Group decision-making proceeded as follows: After the three-second exposure of the card to the group, the subjects submitted an initial private estimate of the number of dots on the card to the experimenter. The experimenter then handed the naive subject's estimate to the confederate playing the role of the persuader. During the note passing session, the persuader reported his estimate to the subject as being 25% higher than the subject's own estimate and in a programmed manner attempted to influence the subject toward this estimate using a strong but rational argument.

The confederate avoided submitting the final group decision, and in every case the group decision was submitted by the naive subject. Following the group decision, each subject was again asked to submit a private estimate as to how many dots he himself thought there were on the card regardless of the group decision.

The three conditions of tenure were varied in the following manner: Under the "remain" or control condition, no mention was made of the possibility of the persuader leaving the group. Under the "may-leave" condition, the persuader interrupted the experimenter after the warm-up task

and said that he might not be able to attend any more of the sessions because of a prior commitment he had forgotten about. Under the "leave" condition, the persuader interrupted the experimenter at the same juncture and said that he would not be able to attend any more of the sessions because of a prior commitment he had forgotten about.

Under all conditions, the confederate who played the role of the persuader produced a programmed series of communications designed to influence the naive subject. Confederates were unaware of the experimental predictions.

Under the conditions requiring a third group member, the neutral confederate announced that he scarcely saw the dot card when it was exposed, that he would like to be informed about the progress of the group, and that he would give any help possible. He remained essentially a non-participant throughout and refused to enter into any arbitration or decision making. It was his presence or absence which was the main point of concern.

The dependent variable in the study was the amount of change displayed by the subject upon exposure to the arguments submitted by the persuading confederate. The amount of change was expressed as the difference between the subject's initial private estimate and his final private estimate divided by the total possible change. Total possible change refers to the 25% range beyond the subject's original estimate.

Results

Table 1 shows a matrix of the mean percentage change scores of the subjects from their initial to final private estimates. An analysis of variance (Table 2) and a Newman-Keuls comparison of differences between individual conditions were calculated. The main effects of the presence

of a third person were in the expected direction (F=3.09; df=1 & 42; p <.10), i.e., persuasion by the confederate was greater in the absence of the third member than in his presence.

The main effect of tenure was also statistically significant (F=3.51; df=2 & 42; p <.025). Comparison among the three tenure conditions revealed more attitude change in the "remain" than in the "leave" condition (q=2.78; p <.05; one-tailed test) and more change in the "may-leave" condition (q=3.56; p <.025; one-tailed test). The "remain" and the "may-leave" conditions did not differ significantly. No significant interaction effects were noted.

Insert Table 1 about here

Study II

Aside from the effect of tenure, (or the open-closed group condition,) Study I suggests that the presence of a third person lessens the persuasibility of persons under conditions of conflict. Study II was designed to extend the analysis of the effect of the neutral under conditions of disagreement by increasing the saliency of the neutral position in the communication network and by focusing on the difficulty of decision making. This was accomplished by placing the neutral in the intermediary position in a chain communication net involving two subjects in marked disagreement. The disputants were required to submit a joint policy statement. The issue in question was the development of a university-wide policy toward campus fraternities. Two control conditions were introduced. Under one condition, the disagreeing policy makers communicated directly. Under a second control condition, the policy makers communi-

cated through an intermediary who had the power to alter the policy arrived at by the two disputants. A 2 x 3 factorial design was generated by placing together subjects who disagreed either moderately or greatly.

Method

Design

The experiment involved in a 2 x 3 factorial design with both factors fixed (Winer's Case 1, 1962, p. 155). The strength of attitude toward fraternities factor had two conditions--weak and strong. The other factor was designated as "group structure," and consisted of three conditions: (a) condition AB, a dyad communicating with no intermediary; (b) condition ANB, a dyad communicating through a neutral intermediary; and (c) condition ADB, a dyad communicating through a decision-maker intermediary. Thus, there were six cells in the design and four experimental groups (dyads) in each cell.

Procedure

Selection of subjects: Subjects were selected on the basis of their attitude toward college fraternities from a pool of 83 volunteer male students in introductory psychology at the University of Oregon. Subjects were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale their response to the following question: "In general, are you pro- or anti- fraternity?" Subjects were asked to avoid, if possible the use of the middle or neutral point of the scale. Of the 83 subjects, seven used the middle or neutral point of the scale. Of the 83 subjects, seven used the middle point of the scale and were eliminated from the study. Of the remaining 76 subjects, 28 participated in a pilot study or could not be scheduled.

On the basis of their answer to the question concerning fraternities, subjects were assigned to either the weak or the strong experimental con-

dition. It was decided that subjects who selected an alternative one point from the midpoint were "weak" and that subjects holding attitude positions at least two points from the midpoint were "strong" in their attitudes toward fraternities. Thus, on a seven-point scale, subjects holding positions 1, 2, 6 or 7 were categorized as "strong" and subjects holding positions 3 or 5 were categorized as "weak."

Each experimental group consisted of two subjects whose attitudes were opposed to one another, the one being pro-fraternity and the other anti-fraternity. In the "strong" experimental condition the subjects both held their opposing attitudes strongly; in the "weak" condition the opposing subjects held their attitudes weakly.

Apparatus: Subjects were seated directly opposite one another in a dyadic communication net apparatus. Subjects were unseen by one another and were not permitted to speak to one another. Communication was accomplished by means of notes written on 5" x 7" cards which were passed through slots in front of the subject (in the AB condition) or to the side (in the ANB and ADB conditions). In the latter cases, the messages were passed to the intermediary who passed them, in turn, to the other subject.

Instructions: Subjects were seated in the communication apparatus as they arrived. The arrival of the confederate was timed so that the neutral position was the only one vacant. When everyone had been seated, subjects were given a single sheet of paper with five sample "policy statements" about fraternities and five accompanying seven-point scales. One of the five statements was: "Fraternities are a positive force on the University of Oregon campus." The words "agree" and "disagree" were at opposite ends of the scale. These "policy statement" questionnaires were collected and subjects were read the following instructions:

> This is an exercise in the exchange of ideas. We would like you to discuss with one another your opinions about fraternities. You have been selected because you have different opinions about fraternities. The object of this exercise is to see if people with differing opinions can resolve their differences. We would like you to resolve any differences you have and to arrive at a joint policy statement. This policy statement should represent your combined opinion as to what the policy of this university should be toward fraternities.
>
> You are constrained in your communication only in that you may not speak to one another and thus must communicate by means of notes written on the paper provided. The note paper is numbered so that we can keep track of the order in which the messages were sent. Please write only one message on each piece of note paper. You will have 30 minutes to arrive at the policy statement. We will remind you of the time remaining every 10 minutes. We will also tell you when five minutes remain. You may resolve the issue before 30 minutes time, but not before 20 minutes. In this way we hope you will not resolve the issue on the basis of insufficient information.

The following instructions were read under conditions where the intermediary was present:

> There are three of you seated here; two of you are seated directly across from one another; the third person is sitting at the side of the apparatus. We want the two of you sitting directly across from each other to discuss the fraternity issue, but we want you to pass your messages through the third person. The third person will read the message, put it in a box, and rewrite the message from memory. It is this rewritten message which you will receive from the other person. The third person will not communicate with either of you, you must simply pass your messages through him.

The following instructions were read under conditions where the intermediary was neutral:

> To repeat, the third person will rewrite your messages from memory directly after he receives them. There is no other way you can communicate to the other person except through the third person. He will not deliberately alter your messages in any way.

The following instructions were read under conditions where the intermediary was a decision-maker:

> To repeat, the third person will rewrite your messages from memory directly after he receives them. There is no other way you can communicate to the other person except through the third person. Although he will not deliberately alter your messages in any way,

> the third person may revise the final policy statement which you arrive at if he feels it is necessary to do so (this sentence is repeated).

The instructions read to the subjects concerning the policy statement and general instructions were:

> Here is an example of a joint policy statement (subjects were given a card on which was printed the statement: "Fraternities are a positive force on the University of Oregon campus.") We would like you to discuss the issue suggested by this statement. Your joint policy statement should look something like this statement; that is, your statement should be brief and to the point, probably no more than 25 words long. We give you this sample policy statement only to suggest a form and topic. Your statement needn't look anything like ours. The important thing is to resolve your differences of opinion and arrive at some kind of joint policy statement.
>
> Write brief messages and write legibly. You are free to write anything you like; there are no restrictions on the number or kind of messages you may write. You needn't wait for a reply before sending another message. The third person is not memorizing the messages word for word. He will merely try to remember the main points and write them down. Thus there will be very little delay in passing your message through the third person.

The "third person" was, in fact, a confederate who read the message, made some scratching noises on a piece of paper with a pencil, and passed on the original message. There was, therefore, no difference in the communication behavior of the confederate between the "neutral" (ANB) and the "decision-maker" (ADB) conditions, and indeed, no difference among the three experimental conditions beyond the perceptions of the participants.

At the end of 30 minutes the experiment was terminated and subjects were given a questionnaire which included the following items: (a) To what extent did you resolve your differences of opinion on fraternities? (b) Did you find it easy or difficult to resolve your differences of opinion on fraternities? (c) To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the outcome of this discussion? (d) To what extent was the other person easy or hard to convince about the merits of your position? Subjects re-

sponded by checking the appropriate point on seven-point scales scored 0 through 6. Only the extreme points on the scales were defined. Answers to the above questions, along with message and word frequency, constituted the dependent variables of Study II.

Results

Resolution of differences

Table 2 presents data concerning the extent to which subjects reported resolution of their differences of opinion about fraternities. A large number indicates a greater perceived resolution of differences. The main effect of attitude strength is statistically significant ($p < .01$) as is

Insert Table 2 about here

the interaction between attitude strength and structure ($p < .01$). These effects are primarily associated with the presence of an intermediary and with differences in his role as neutral and decision-maker. As would be expected, groups with strongly opposed subjects reported that they resolved their differences to a lesser extent than did groups of weakly opposed subjects. It is important to note, however, that this difference occurred only in the presence of the intermediary. Furthermore, comparing the ANB and the ADB conditions the presence of the neutral intermediary as compared with a decision-maker intermediary appears to reduce the resolution of differences between strongly opposed subjects; that is, the presence of a neutral militates against the resolution of differences, especially when the parties are strongly opposed to one another.

Difficulty of resolving differences

Table 3 presents data for the reported difficulty experienced in resolving differences of opinion. In this table, a larger number indicates greater difficulty. The main effect of attitude strength is statistically significant

($p < .05$). Groups with strongly opposed subjects reported greater difficulty

Insert Table 3 about here

of resolving differences than did groups with weakly opposed subjects. As might be expected, Table 3 is almost the mirror image of Table 2. As in Table 2, the greatest difference between the weak and strong conditions occurs under the neutral condition, and the least difference occurs in the direct AB condition, but here the interaction effects are not statistically significant.

Satisfaction with the outcome

Table 4 presents data for reported satisfaction with the outcome of the discussion. A smaller number indicates greater satisfaction. While none of the effects are statistically significant, it is noted that these data support the results found in Table 2 and 3. In particular, the greatest difference between weak and strong conditions is found in the neutral condition and the least difference occurs in the direct condition.

Insert Table 4 about here

Difficulty of convincing the other

Table 5 presents data for reported difficulty of convincing the other person about the merits of one's own position. A larger number indicates greater difficulty. Again, none of the results are statistically significant, but once again the data are consistent with earlier results concerning the neutral condition.

Insert Table 5 about here

Number of messages exchanged

Table 6 presents the data with regard to the number of messages exchanged.

Insert Table 6 about here

The main effect of structure is significant ($p < .05$). The greatest number of messages were sent under the neutral condition and the least number in the direct condition. It cannot be argued, therefore, that the presence of a neutral inhibits communication between A and B. It would appear, in fact, that the neutral stimulates the flow of communication (that is, stimulates conflict.)

Number of words exchanged

Table 7 presents data for the number of words exchanged. The effect of attitude strength is statistically significant ($p < .01$). Subjects whose attitudes differed strongly exchanged more words. These results suggest that length of communication under these conditions is an indicator of difficulty of conflict resolution. If it is assumed that subjects having greater difficulty convincing each other made a greater effort to convince each other, then the results of Tables 5 and 7 can be seen as supporting Festinger's (1950) theory of Informal Social Communication. Festinger states: "The pressure on members to communicate to others in the group concerning "item x" increases monotonically with increase in the perceived discrepancy in opinion concerning "item x" among members of the group (p. 6)." Thus, the results of Table 6 where it was found that the presence of a neutral was associated with a greater number of messages may now be interpreted in support of the hypotheses that the presence of a neutral tends to sustain conflict.

Insert Table 7 about here

Discussion

The results of the foregoing studies indicate that the presence of a neutral third party during a controversy between two persons tends to increase resistance to persuasion (Study I), increase communication frequency, and increase the participants' perceived difficulty of reaching a decision (Study II). Conflict appears to be sustained by the neutral's presence.

It was initially proposed that the disputants' perception of the third person is crucial. In this regard it was noted that the neutral is perceived by the disputants as being only momentarily or publicly non-influenced, and that he is a potential member of a coalition with one of the disputants. It was also suggested that the presence of a neutral renders the dispute public and emphasizes the salience of competition between members.

It is further proposed that the neutral represents the norms of society, and that the policy making participants respond toward the neutral as a representative of society who may report publicly, not only the group's policy but also the policy making process, particularly the degree to which the participants adhered to the guidelines of acceptable persuasion and group processes.

The neutral in these studies was more than an observer; he was a potential participant. In this sense, the neutral potentially opposed nonacceptable policy making processes such as the exploitation of either member. The neutral may break silence in the event that one of the members attempts to use the advantage of a power position to persuade the other member to his point of view. This suggests that the presence of a neutral minimizes the utilization of power differences among disputants and thereby sustains conflict.

At a more general level, the introduction of a third person into the controversy introduces greater complexity, or at the very least more degrees of freedom. Each party may perceive the third person differently, yet the overall effect may be the same, reduction in the degree of agreement. Indeed, the third person may be perceived by each member as if he, the third person, was an advantage, in some way, to himself.

Thus, in the first study, it is proposed that the persuadee perceived the neutral as unconvinced of the advantage of either position. Viewed in this way the neutral provided support concerning the unacceptability of the other's arguments for each party in the conflict. The neutral, then, tends to increase the resistance which either party in conflict can mobilize against the other, thereby reducing the influence of the other. The presence of the neutral facilitates cognitive restructuring of the conflict situation in such a way as to support the self.

In the first study, it was found that the persuader was less effective under conditions where he was an imminent departee. These results complement the results of an earlier study by Ziller, Behringer, and Jansen (1961) in which it was found that the longer term group member compared with a newcomer was rated higher with regard to his contribution to the group even though the nature of that contribution was experimentally controlled. Thus, the newcomer as well as the egressor tend to possess less power in the group. Tenure and power are positively associated.

From another theoretical framework, however, the presence of a newcomer or an egressor are both indicators of open group conditions (Ziller, 1965). Thus, both studies support the hypothesis that open groups in comparison

with closed groups more readily incur conflict. Here it is proposed that open groups are less concerned about group maintenance since membership is in a constant state of flux. Conflict may be dissipated through membership changes. Closed groups, on the other hand, necessarily, are more concerned with the reverberations of conflict and the possible effects on future group performance.

Throughout it has been necessary to qualify the results of the foregoing studies because the design required the neutral to be present from the outset and to remain throughout the discussion, and because of the short time period involved. Experiments varying these characteristics are readily suggested.

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Footnotes

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[2]This study is a condensation of a Master's Thesis completed by J. J. Tognoli at the University of Delaware.

TABLE 1

Mean Percentage Change Scores

Under Three Conditions of the Persuader's Tenure and

the Conditions of Presence or Absence of a Neutral Member

	Tenure			
	Leave	May Leave	Remain	Combined Mean
Neutral Absent	40.97	57.00	61.40	53.12
Neutral Present	9.86	55.95	39.64	35.15
Combined Mean	23.41	56.48	50.52	

F(Neutral) = 3.09, df = 1&42, p <.10

F(Tenure) = 3.5, df = 2&42, p <.05

TABLE 2

Total Scores

Extent of Felt Resolution of Differences

	Structure			
Attitude Strength	AB	ANB	ADB	Total
Weak	30	40	35	105
Strong	34	11	24	69
Total	64	51	59	

F(Attitude Strength) = 9.59, df = 1&18, p <.01

F(Interaction) = 7.39, df = 2&18, p <.01

TABLE 3

Total Scores

Reported Difficulty of Resolving Differences

	Structure			
Attitude Strength	AB	ANB	ADB	Total
Weak	14	12	15	41
Strong	18	37	27	82
Total	32	49	42	

F(Attitude Strength) = 7.86, df = 1&18, p <.05

F(Interaction) = 1.57, df = 2&18, p <.25

TABLE 4

Total Scores

Satisfaction with the Outcome

	Structure			
Attitude Strength	AB	ANB	ADB	Total
Weak	19	8	13	40
Strong	13	26	24	63
Total	32	34	37	

F(Attitude Strength) = 2.76, df = 1&18, p <.25

F(Interaction) = 2.39, df = 2&18, p <.25

TABLE 5

Total Scores

Difficulty of Convincing the Other

	Structure			
Attitude Strength	AB	ANB	ADB	Total
Weak	18	19	15	52
Strong	22	31	26	79
Total	40	50	41	

F(Attitude Strength) = 4.10, df = 1&18, p <.10

TABLE 6

Total Number of Messages Exchanged

	Structure			
Attitude Strength	AB	ANB	ADB	Total
Weak	75	135	103	313
Strong	68	114	93	275
Total	143	249	196	

F(Structure) = 5.45, df = 2&18, p <.05

TABLE 7

Total Number of Words Exchanged

	Structure			
Attitude Strength	AB	ANB	ADB	Total
Weak	1440	2239	1886	5565
Strong	2716	2704	2467	7887
Total	4156	4943	4353	

F(Attitude Strength) = 9.23, df = 1&18, p <.01